Staging Marginality: Ben Jonson’s Bartholomew Fair

Susan Payne

STAGING MARGINALITY: BEN JONSON'S *BARTHOLOMEW FAIR*

1. The very fact that Ben Jonson (1572-1637) tended to invent his own plots rather than culling them from a well-established hot-house of ready-cultivated material, whether Italian fiction or British (or Roman) history, would appear to place his plays as a whole, despite the artist's efforts to foreground his command of classicism, in a marginal position respecting those of Shakespeare, say, or Marlowe[1]. But, in the case of *Bartholomew Fair*[2] (1614), marginality informs it on every level, from its *sui generis* structure to its heterogeneous but very definitely "lower class" *dramatis personae.* Jonson himself seems to underwrite this assumption by excluding it from his celebrated 1616 Folio[3].

While constantly praised for its showmanship, *Bartholomew Fair* still meets with criticism for the diffuseness of its action, especially from the director's and actors' points of view. If one skims through reviews of recent productions of the play the most frequently repeated comments

[1] It is often pointed out how Jonson, unlike Shakespeare and Marlowe, creates his own plots – though relying heavily on classical sources and the Italian *commedia dell'arte* for character types and situations.

[2] First performed in 1614, printed in 1631 and published 1640, *Bartholomew Fair* (or *Bartholmew Fayre* as it is spelled on the title page of the first printed version) had its debut on 31st October, 1614 at the (then brand new) Hope Theatre, Bankside, Southwark, built for the theatre impresario Philip Henslowe and his son-in-law the tragic actor Edward Alleyn, and was performed by the Lady Elizabeth's Servants, a company formed from the amalgamation of the adult company, the Lady Elizabeth's Men with the Children of the Queen's Revels in 1613. The Queen's Revels company was patronised by Queen Anne; the Lady Elizabeth, daughter of Queen Anne and King James I, was herself Queen of Bohemia, after her marriage in 1613. The Hope was an amphitheatre, built on the model of its neighbour, the Swan, but with a moveable stage, a necessary feature because of its dual nature as a bear-baiting ring. It was agreed that bear baiting would occupy the theatre only once every two weeks, but the sport proved to be more profitable than the plays. Players left the theatre in 1616 after the death of Henslowe but the baiting went on until 1656 when the Hope was closed as a result of several baiting accidents. In 1648 the theatres in London were closed by the Puritans but, ironically, the cruel spectacle of bull- and bear-baiting was allowed to continue and was popular throughout the Puritan era.

[3] One of the most interesting aspects of the afterlife of Jonson's plays concerns what he did and did not include in his celebrated 1616 Folio publication, *The Workes of Beniamin Jonson*, in which appeared, among poems and epigrams, plays, masques and entertainments. The volume has been much discussed and, in his time, mocked for the importance of the word "works" when applied to plays. It was, however the product of considerable editorial labour, whereby his plays appeared as literary texts, and to the question of a contemporary wit, "Pray tell me Ben, where doth the mystery lurk,/What others call a play you call a work?" a more sympathetic answer came from a friend, "The authors friend thus for the author says,/ Ben's plays are works, when others works are plays" (Quotations from *Wits Recreations* (1640), cited in Ben Jonson, *Works*, 11 vols., ed. C.H. Herford, P. and E. Simpson, Oxford, 1925-52, Vol 9, p. 13). *Bartholomew Fair* was not included in the 1616 Folio, possibly because of its incompatibility with the aim of the *Workes*, that of establishing the clear outlines of a Jonsonian canon which would bear comparison with the classical literature on which it drew.

from a negative point of view are those such as "pretty obscure, hasn't much plot to speak of and is three and a half hours long[4]" or "[...] the plot [is] a gentle little tenuous strand of a thing [...] there are also too many *longueurs*, partly because, in spite of what the scholars say, Jonson can usually do with a bit of cutting for the stage[5]." What the scholars say however is very much to the point if the scholars in question is T.S. Eliot. His critical opinion (as is usually the case) bears quoting even after eighty-odd years:

> Jonson employs immense dramatic constructive skill: it is not so much skill in a plot as skill in doing without a plot. He never manipulates as complicated a plot as that of *The Merchant of Venice*; he has in his best plays nothing like the intrigue of Restoration comedy. In *Bartholomew Fair* it is hardly a plot at all; the marvel of the play is the bewildering rapid chaotic action of the fair; it is the fair itself, not anything that happens to take place in the fair [...]
>
> His characters are and remain, like Marlowe's, simplified characters [...] The simplification consists largely in reduction of detail, in the seizing of aspects relevant to the relief of an emotional impulse which remains the same for that character conform to a particular setting. This stripping is essential to the art, to which is also essential a flat distortion in the drawing; it is an art of caricature, like Marlowe's. It is a great caricature, which is beautiful; and a great humour, which is serious. The "world" of Jonson is sufficiently large; it is a world of poetic imagination; it is sombre. He did not get the third dimension, but he was not trying to get it [...]
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> Of all the dramatists of his time, Jonson is probably the one whom the present age would find the most sympathetic if it knew him. There is a brutality, a lack of sentiment, a polished surface, a handling of large bold designs in brilliant colours, which ought to attract about three thousand people in London and elsewhere. At least, if we had a contemporary Shakespeare and a contemporary Jonson, it would be Jonson who would arouse the enthusiasm of the intelligentsia! Though he is saturated in literature, he never sacrifices the theatrical qualities – theatrical in the most favourable sense – to literature or to the study of character. His work is a titanic show[6].

Contemporary reviewers, theatre-goers and directors-in-difficulty and the epitome of the modernist poet and critic (and, of course playwright, whose plays are not celebrated for the speed of their action or for the clarity of their plotting) all seem to agree then on the basic characteristics of Jonson's play. But the critic/scholar on the text end is sure that these characteristics are virtues, whereas the people on the performance end have their doubts. A final glance at this latter point of view may be useful before analysing the play itself. A reviewer of the 1997-99 RSC production notes:

> The related strands of plot are not that much clarified in Boswell's modishly hip production. But the production would expose the black-garbed Puritans [...] to more

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[4] *The Express*, review of the Stratford opening of Lawrence Boswell's RSC production of *Bartholomew Fair*, 9 December, 1997, at the Swan Theatre.

[5] *The Stratford-upon Avon Herald*, review of the London opening of Terry Hands' RSC production , 7 November, 1969, at the Aldwych Theatre.

[6] T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, London, Methuen, 1928, pp.107-108.

> comic ridicule if the performances were better pointed [...] The directors concept delights, not its execution[7].

Another journalist commenting on the same production writes:

> All that occurs is that a batch of well-to-do citizens – ranging from dimwits to romantic young bloods, crusading Puritans to repressed wives – wander among the traders, tarts, pimps, pickpockets and madmen of Bartholomew Fair and receive what Jonson regarded as a salutary shakeup. They are like particles thrust into a highly unstable physical field. Ids are released, anarchy is unleashed [...] Boswell's cast can, as I say, be faulted for being too febrile[8].

The article by the above quoted review of Terry Hand's earlier RSC production also evinces the difficulties of staging *Bartholomew Fair*. The reviewer, Sheila Bannock, mentions, among other things, that "the production of the play suffers[...] from an attempt to cram too many characters into too small a space without organising them into a pattern", that " the director and some of his cast having [...] been offered a variety of stools upon which to be melancholy, seem to have fallen flat on their faces among them" and that "much of the minor characterisation goes undeveloped and even, probably, unseen [...] the stage is so full of indistinguishable people [...] that the main characters are hard put to it to tell their tale, much less point their morals"[9].

These are the negative comments extracted from the criticism of just two representations of the play separated from one another by thirty years (it should be emphasized that the many positive remarks on both productions far outweighed them). But what strikes one's attention is that the problems mentioned are very similar and all have to do with the difficulty of staging the market place, the fair. Too many people, not enough plot. And yet critics both theoretical and practical praise the play as one of Jonson's masterpieces.

2. The problem would seem to have something to do with reading, interpreting (and staging) *Bartholomew Fair* simply as a play by Jonson and not, as one critic has cogently pointed out, by Jonson not Shakespeare (or one could add by Jonson not Marlowe). Loxley's accusation that through the ages *soi-disant* criticism of Jonson has often had the covert intention of "corralling Jonson into the role of [Shakespeare's] Other, the negation against whose darkness the glory of Shakespeare would appear ever more strongly in its true luminescence?[10]" Eliot, the groundbreaker,

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[7] *The London Evening Standard*, review of the London opening of Boswell's RSC production, 24 February, 1999, at the Young Vic Theatre.
[8] *The Times*, review of the same performance.
[9] *The Stratford-upon Avon Herald*, cit.
[10] James Loxley, *The Complete Critical Guide to Ben Jonson*, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 126.

in the essay cited, refuted this binary opposition and posited a Jonson whose poetics were independent of rather than in opposition to the Shakespearian stage Seemingly, the two productions and their critics quoted above were aware that this problem exists, but had not found a valid solution to it. If one approaches the text of *Bartholomew Fair*[11], a work which is perhaps the most idiosyncratically "Jonsonian" both in style and character, and the last of the four major comedies[12], bearing in mind that understanding will be conditioned by the originality and expertise that Jonson has reached by this point in his career, problems of reading and perhaps of success in staging may arise less frequently, despite the fact that the play is indeed half as long again as the other three and has twice as many speaking parts.

To represent "the fair" in "the marketplace[13]" – the apparent chaos of the margins of society in all its complexity - Jonson has exercised more control, not less, on his material. Indeed, as we shall see, he encloses the margins of his play in a double frame. His wholehearted embracing of classical *dicta*, based on a sound grounding in classical scholarship and a lifelong love of learning, is too well known to need commenting on and in any case is beyond the scope of this essay, but a passing reminder is perhaps not out of place when considering *Bartholomew Fair*, not an obvious candidate as an example of this aspect of Jonson's craft.

It is often observed that in both *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* Jonson respected the classical unity of time: Richard Harp points out a practical reason why:

> *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* were staged [...] by the King's Men at the Globe Theatre on the Bankside [...] Working in their own open-air theatre [they] had a large raised stage facing a substantial auditorium, without, however, any sort of artificial lighting or any proscenium curtain. Plays were performed in the afternoon, and in both *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* Jonson is careful (beyond the wont of his contemporaries) to

[11] The editor of the New Mermaid *Bartholmew Fair* (London and New York, Black, Norton, 1977) G.R Hibbard gives the sole authority for the text as the folio printed by John Beale, in 1631, for Robert Allott, with no known publication following on the printing. According to Hibbard, Allott's widow transferred her rights to John Leggatt and Andrew Crooke in July 1637 (just before Jonson's death on August 6th of the same year), and it would seem that they sold the sheets of the 1631 printing to Robert Meighen who issued them, with those of *The Devil is an Ass* (first played in 1616) and *The Staple of News* (first played in 1626), in 1640 with a new title-page, as 'The Second Volume' of Jonson's 'Workes'.

[12] The preceding three being, of course, *Volpone* (1606), *Epicoene* (1609) and *The Alchemist* (1610).

[13] Bartholomew Fair as Arthur Kinney reminds us, "derived from a royal charter granted by Henry I to his former jester Rahere, who needed the revenue for the management and upkeep of the priory and hospital, both dedicated to St. Bartholomew, which he had founded in Smithfield, just northwest of the city walls of London. The feast of St. Bartholomew was August 24 – the day on which Jonson sets his play – and it commemorates the apostle who was flayed alive; a symbolic knife generally depicted in his martyrdom [...] But for centuries Smithfield was identified with harsh justice – of the kind Overdo longs to install – which condemned and punished religious non-conformists – as Busy would do – both Catholic and Protestant [...] Following the bloody Catholic massacre of thousands of French Huguenots in Paris on St. Bartholomew's Day in 1572, said to be the bloodiest day since Herod slaughtered the Innocents, many London booksellers displayed only Bibles on their stalls. August 24 thus came to represent religious conflict and the exercise of justice alongside the need for tolerance and the desire for freedom of thought and action". Arthur Kinney ed., *Renaissance Drama*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1999, p. 484.

> confine the action to a single day: thus the sun would be setting in stage time just as it was in real time[14].

The same conditions apply to the opening of *Bartholomew Fair* at the Hope (although of course not to the second performance, the next day, at the court of King James). And Jonson makes specific, if ironic, reference to his use of dramatic decorum in a theatre-cum-beargarden when, at the end of the Induction[15] he makes the Scrivener say:

> And though the Fair be not kept in the same region that some here, perhaps, would have it, yet think that therein the author hath observed a special decorum, the place being as dirty as Smithfield, and as stinking every whit.

The action of *Bartholomew Fair* also takes a single day, beginning with Littlewit greeting his wife Win by giving her "good morrow" (I,i.19) and commenting on her dress, and Quarlous remarking later on in Act I on Winwife's early rising and departure from his lodging (I,iii.1-9), and ending with Justice Overdo's invitation to the other characters "home with me to my house to supper" (V,vi.113). However the continuity and flow of time within this interval has often been criticized for its confusion and indeterminacy[16].

The unity of place is also respected, in that it is (in and around) Smithfield. Act I, from the deictic signals furnished by the characters themselves[17], would seem to take place inside Littlewit's house, and the fairgoers (with the single exception of Justice Overdo) gather there. In this way, the location of the first Act taken with Overdo's invitation at the end of the play, is assimilated into the series of framing devices which attempt to incarcerate the chaos of the fair within the bounds of bourgeois domesticity. Loxley, once again, evinces the "refusal to posit one authoritative place from which a singular truth can be seen[18]," and Womack too observes:

> The Fair is evidently an equivalent of the alchemist's shop or Volpone's sickroom: a space where stable identities dissolve in proliferating forms of desire and which, in its asymmetrical combination of utopianism and deception, is the theatre's own, self-reflected image[19].

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[14] Harp, *cit*. pp. ix-x.

[15] References from this point onwards refer to Hibbard's edition (*cit*). Hibbard takes his spelling of the title, *Bartholmew Fair*, from the title page of the 1631 printing of the play. As he points out, Bartholomew was probably pronounced *Bartlemy.*

[16] See, for example, Loxley, *cit*., p. 170.

[17] A propos of the problematics of deixis see pp. 16-18 of the still extremely relevant essay by Alessandro Serpieri, "Ipotesi teorica di segmentazione del testo teatrale" in *Come comunica il teatro: dal testo alla scena*, Milano, Edizioni Il Formichiere, 1978, pp. 11-54.

[18] *Ibidem.*

[19] Peter Womack, *Ben Jonson*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1986, p.145.

The "dissolving" and "proliferating" of which Womack speaks are enabled by the fact that the dramatic space[s] of the fair, too, frame an area of apparent chaos: this is the reason for several interesting, if somewhat anachronistic essays which analyse *Bartholomew Fair* with reference to Bakhtin's theory of carnival[20]. In fact, as the action progresses through its maze of meetings, its plethora of *personae*, the fair seems more to contain its many spaces one within another in a constant *mise en abyme*, the centre being the space in which the puppet show is held, in a perfect example of Jonson's metatheatrical self-reflexivity, a typically Renaissance dramaturgical ploy.

It is however the unity of action which is the most tricky of the three to discern and which, from all reports, is the aspect of the play which causes the greatest problems from the point of view of performance. This is perhaps because the action in *Bartholomew Fair* is best compared not to a thread, but to a web, a lattice of relationships that captures and includes time and space in a complex and superficial network. Neither in the Prologue nor in the Induction is any attempt made to anticipate or introduce a plot. Littlewit, in his opening speech, posits the match between Bartholomew Cokes and Grace Wellborn as a possible subject, and Justice Overdo (disguised as Mad Arthur of Bradley) states his intention to follow the example of others before him and "in Justice' name, and the King's, and for the Commonwealth [...] detect [...] enormities" (II. I, 46-47). However, although the configuration of the action is further clarified by the division of the *dramatis personae* into two main groups, the fairgoers and the fair people, the number and diversity of these characters is such as to leave the issue in a state of unease.

Perhaps this is due to the fact that Jonson here is indeed concerned with more with character (in the sense of personality) and deliberately exploits the time and place at his disposal to develop each separate portrait at the action's expense. One is reminded of the Breughel family's canvases[21]: huge spreads of humanity at a first glance, but when examined in detail each figure (or semi-caricature) minutely finished.

In the Induction the play is prefigured as a list – a jumble – of characters:

> [...] the author doth promise a strutting horse-courser, with a leer drunkard, two or three to attend him, in as good equipage as you would wish. And then for Kindheart, the tooth-drawer, a fine oily pig-woman, with her tapster to bid you welcome, and a consort of roarers for music. A wise Justice of Peace *meditant*, instead of a juggler with an ape. A civil cutpurse *searchant*. A sweet singer of new ballads *allurant*; and as fresh a hypocrite as was ever broached *rampant.*(INDUCTION. 114-121)

[20] In particular Jonathan Haynes, "Festivity and the Dramatic Economy of Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*', *English Literary History*, 51 (1984), pp. 645-668. Haynes explicitly recognizes that the Bakhtinian cast of his criticism is not entirely appropriate. Bakhtin was theorizing Rabelais (who was writing a century or so earlier) and the social basis upon which Rabelaisian carnival was founded was no longer wholly applicable to the conditions in Jacobean London

[21] Especially wedding- and feast-day scenes by Pieter the Elder (1525-69) and Pieter the Younger (1564-1634).

In fact an attempt is made to subvert the desire on the part of the spectators to construct stories for the characters, or indeed to interpret them (!), but to take them at their face value, as they are presented (in a word, *superficially*):

> [...] it is finally agreed by the aforesaid hearers and spectators that they neither in themselves conceal, nor suffer by them to be concealed, any state-decipherer, or politic picklock of the scene, so solemnly ridiculous as to search out who was meant by the ginger-bread woman, who by the hobby-horse man, who by the costard-monger, nay, who by their wares; or that will pretend to affirm, on his own inspired ignorance, what Mirror for Magistrates is meant by the Justice, what great lady by the pig-woman, what concealed statesman by the seller of mousetraps, and so of the rest. (INDUCTION. 130-140)

It could be said that there is no real development in any of the characters, no *anagnorisis* or recognition. Grace Wellborn, the young marriageable heroine is no longer an *ingénue* at the play's opening, if indeed she ever was one. She manages to avoid marrying the foolish Bartholomew Cokes her intended husband, but her desire for a husband she may love because he is "reasonable" (IV.iii. 35-39) is that of a person who has already recognized the way of the world. Justice Overdo ends up in the stocks but there is no possibility of seeing his invitation to the cast "home with me to my house to supper" or his promise "my intents are *ad correctionem, non ad destructionem; ad ædificandum non ad diruendum"* as anything other than the desire to be finished with the day, if not the play. Coke's reply, which ends the play proper "Yes, and bring the actors along, we'll ha' the rest o' the play at home" (V.vi.113-118) would seem to ratify this opinion as, rather than winding up the action, it once again refers the audience to the metatheatrical convention which will immediately be taken up and exploited by the Epilogue. Jonson is, of course, in this play, responding to a trend in playgoing behaviour with which he (though masque-maker *par excellence*) is not at all in agreement, the desire for spectacle instead of drama. Andrew Gurr, when discussing the terms 'spectator' and 'audience' comments:

> Every time Jonson called his audience "spectators", as he almost invariably did, he was covertly sneering at the debased preference for stage spectacle rather than the poetic 'soul of the play, which he claimed they could only find by listening to his words[22].

As Gurr himself points out, the text which is central to the dispute is of course the very set of Articles to which I have just referred and which Jonson drew up in the Induction to *Bartholomew Fair* for the audience at the Hope in 1614. This parodic covenant between "the spectators or hearers, at the Hope on the Bankside, in the county of Surrey, on the one party; and the

[22] Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, 2nd Edition, Cambridge, CUP, 1996, p. 86.

author of *Bartholomew Fair* in the said place and county, on the other party" goes on to state the several articles, the first of which reads thus:

> INPRIMIS, it is covenanted and agreed, by and between the parties above-said, and the said spectators, and hearers, as well as the curious and envious, as the favouring and judicious, as also the grounded judgements and understandings do for themselves severally covenant and agree, to remain in the places their money and friends have put them in, with patience, for the space of two hours and a half, and somewhat more. In which time the author promiseth to present them, by us, with a new sufficient play called *Bartholomew Fair*, merry, and as full of noise as sport: made to delight all, and to offend none; provided they have the wit or the honesty to think well of themselves. (INDUCTION,73-85)

Here Jonson is no longer displaying the expectations he did fourteen years before in the prologue to *Cynthia's Revels* (1600) – admittedly performed before wealthier and more cultured patrons of his art – where he says:

> If gracious silence, sweet attention,
> Quick sight and quicker apprehension
> (The lights of judgement's throne) shine anywhere,
> Our doubtful author hopes this is their sphere,
> And therefore opens he himself to those,
> To other weaker beams his labours close,
> As loth to prostitute their virgin strain
> To every vulgar and adulterate brain.
> In this alone his Muse her sweetness hath,
> She shuns the print of any beaten path,
> And proves new ways to come to learned ears:
> Pied ignorance she neither loves nor fears.
> Nor hunts she after popular applause,
> Or foamy praise that drops from common jaws.
> The garland that she wears their hands must twine
> Who can both censure, understand, define
> What merit is: then cast those piercing rays
> Round as a crown, instead of honoured bays,
> About his poesy; which (he knows) affords
> Words, above action, matter, above words[23].

Although he is addressing a more (culturally) marginal audience, Jonson is still hopeful of a hearing of his play from start to finish, but does not mention "gracious silence, sweet attention" – although he does mention, in the second Article of the Induction, whose subject is "free-will of censure, to like or dislike at their own charge", his hope that if a person is paying for "half a dozen" other people "he may censure for all them too, so that he will undertake that they shall be silent." (INDUCTION, 92-94). What has completely changed is the hierarchy of poetic values enunciated

[23] Ben Jonson, *Works*, 11 vols., ed. C.H. Herford, P. and E. Simpson, Oxford, 1925-52, Vol. IV, p. 43.

fourteen years before. In 1600, 'action' is on the lowest rung of the ladder, and even this is hardly perceptible to "vulgar" and "adulterate" brains: on the next rung up we have "words" then, at the top of the ladder, "matter", the idea, or as a later era would have it, inspiration. In 1614, these refinements, or refinings, have gone. Gone too is the anticipation of an audience whose "quick sight and quicker apprehension" will fashion a garland for him from their capacity to "censure, understand, define" – "censure" is the only term which remains. And gone is any reference to "action" of any sort.

In *Bartholomew Fair*, then Jonson is finally responding to his persistent recognition that his expectations of aesthetic appreciation have always been too high, at a moment in his career when his skill and experience (and reputation) have never been higher. His reaction, by now also that of a master masque writer[24], is that of combining spectacle with (comic) drama. And it is here indeed, as he maintains in 1614 the "sweetness" of his 1600 "Muse" by still managing to "shun the print of any beaten path/And prove new ways" that his innovatory skill is shown at its height.

3. The world Jonson represents within the marketplace of Smithfield (within the Hope bear-garden/playhouse, or, just as appropriately, within King James's court[25]) will be shown to be multiform and multifaceted and the decorum of the play will be that of maintaining a continuing tone rather than action within the single day and space[26]. The play opens with the words of Littlewit:

> A pretty conceit and worth the finding! I ha' such luck to spin out these fine things still, and like a silk-worm, out of myself. Here's Master Bartholomew Cokes, of Harrow o' th' Hill, I' th' county of Middlesex, esquire, takes forth his licence to marry Mistress Grace Wellborn of the said place and county: and when does he take it forth? Today! The four and twentieth day of August! Bartholomew day! Bartholomew upon Bartholomew! There's the device (I. i, 1-8)

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[24] By 1614 Jonson had been writing masques for King James for nearly ten years., and would go on doing so for the Stuart court for another twenty.

[25] "Used in the murk of winter, indoors, with stages and 'degrees' or tiers of seating set up for the occasion, the Court venues resembled hall playhouses rather than the amphitheatres [..] In 1607 under James I[the old Banqueting House in Whitehall] was pulled down and rebuilt on a rather larger scale [...] Plays were put on there from 1610, though usually they were assigned to the Hall or Great Chamber, or the Cockpit, an enclosed wooden amphitheatre built under Henry VIII for cockfighting, which James's son Prince Henry paid to have altered for playing in 1611." Gurr, *cit*, pp.164-165.

[26] Rocco Coronato, in his essay "Il giudice alla gogna: Panoptikon e occasione festiva in *Bartholomew Fair*", RLMC, 49 (1), pp. 13-37, cogently observes that the second performance of the play took place on All Saint's Day, and that this circumstance is not purely fortuitous. All Saint's Day was indeed the first day of the winter festivities, the day James habitually returned to Whitehall and was also the beginning of the medieval ritual of carnival. Coronato quotes from Stow's *Survey of London* (1618) "In the feast of Christmas, there was in the Kings house, wheresoeuer he lodged, a Lord of Misrule, or Master of Merry Disports, and the like had yee in the House of every Noble-man of honour, or good worship, where he spirituall or temporall [...] Those Lords beginning their rule on Alhallon Eve,continued the same til the morrow after the east of the Purification, commonly called Candlemas day. In all which space there were fine and subtil disguising, Maskes and Mummeries". p. 33.

It would seem from this *incipit* that Littlewit is presenting himself as the 'director' within the play, especially when it later transpires that he is the writer of the (terrible) play enacted by the puppet theatre – and that Jonson is presenting Littlewit as his parodic *alter ego*, someone who knows, as he does, how to relate the subject-matter of a play to the special day of its first performance, and, indeed, how to 'spin a yarn'. But as the play goes on Littlewit, as his name inevitably predicts (even parodically and fleetingly Jonson would never have represented himself under such a sobriquet), shows himself to be a travesty of the playwright rather than his on-stage surrogate, especially when, in Act V, the puppet show (if ever there was an example of "marginal" theatre, this is it) is performed, and evinces itself to be an appallingly written parody of the play itself. Bartholomew Cokes, the gull of the play, Littlewit's wealthy, witless young client, who has by the end of the play lost everything, including his affianced wife, makes an attempt himself at the role of on-stage interpreter of the action and predictably fails:

> 'The ancient modern history of *Hero and Leander*, otherwise called the *Touchstone of True Love*, with as true a trial of friendship between Damon and Pythias, two faithful friends of the Bankside'? Pretty i'faith! What's the meaning on't? Is't an interlude? or what is't?

It has to be explained to him by Littlewit himself later on in the scene, although Lantern/Leatherhead, the puppet master, has already told him that is a simplified version of Marlowe's erotic epyllion[27]:

> I have only made it a little easy, and modern for the times, sir, that's all. As, for the Hellespont, I imagine our Thames here; and then Leander I make a dyer's son, about Puddle Wharf: and Hero a wench o' the Bankside, who, going over one morning to Old Fish Street, Leander spies her land at Trig Stairs, and falls in love with her. Now do I introduce Cupid having metamorphosed himself into a drawer, and he strikes Hero in love with a pint of sherry.

Indeed the "play within the play" is functional both as synecdoche of the whole of *Bartholomew Fair*, as a framing device which recalls the themes of the Induction and, paradoxically, as the 'innermost' space of the fair itself, each scene having as it were opened upon another as more and more characters are added to the stage bringing their own space with them. This effect is caused by the complete lack of stage directions as far as place is concerned[28] (except

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[27] *Hero and Leander*, Marlowe's most substantial poetic work is an unfinished fragment printed in 1598 that was eventually completed by George Chapman (1600, 16O6, 1609, 1613).

[28] This is of course almost invariably true of all Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. But in the first place it is as a rule possible to deduct the location of a scene from references immediately made by the characters on stage. And in the

of course for the title of the play) even within the text itself. So when the effective "centre" of the fair is reached we are faced with a distorting mirror showing us a simulacrum of the play, a parody, whose actors are made of wood. As Mario Domenichelli remarks this is

> [...] un teatro di "actors", e non di "players", un teatro di 'pupi', magari in carne ed ossa, manovrati dallo scrittore a distanza attraverso il testo del suo "dramatic poem", e non *play*, risponde bene alla dimensione 'caricaturale', 'umorale', il contrario di una qualsiasi pretesa di 'profondità psicologica', del teatro di Jonson: teatro di parola, certo, più che di azione, in cui il testo, lo scritto, si arroga la parte importante. Bene, in questo senso, certo, quel *play within the play* dei burattini, apre ancora, come sempre, lo spazio metateatrale, in cui, sinteticamente, il teatro si definisce e riflette la propria natura e funzione[29].

The puppet theatre is, paradoxically, the place where zealous Zeal-of-the-Land Busy[30], whose Puritanical excesses have informed the play with tirades against theatre and Fair while he busily stuffs himself with Ursla the pig-woman's roast pork, is vanquished and ridiculed.

Besides Littlewit's attempt to posit himself metatheatrically as "director" of *Bartholomew Fair* and Cokes's failure to interpret the puppet show written by Littlewit himself, the role of the "playwright"- or "director"-within the play is transferred from one character to another during the course of the action. One of these is almost half-way through, in Act III, scene ii, when Quarlous, one of the three "observer" figures[31], opens the scene with the comment to Winwife, another:

> We had wonderful ill luck to miss this prologue o' the purse, but the best is we shall have five Acts of him ere night: he'll be spectacle enough! I'll answer for't. (III. ii, 1-3)

Quarlous here, with this metatheatrical parenthesis at the centre of the play's structure, almost in the centre of the third act, demonstrates that he is the most authoritative of the various "framebreakers", despite the plurality of frames. Rocco Coronato is right when he states that Winwife and Quarlous

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second the space itself in much of Jonsonian comedy – especially the major comedies - is far more highly structured, consisting of interiors, usually the house[s] of the protagonist[s], with occasional forays to the area immediately outside.

[29] Mario Domenichelli, *Il limite dell'ombra. Le figure della soglia nel teatro inglese fra Cinque e Seicento*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 1994, pp.26-27.

[30] See Serpieri pp. 5 and 8 and note 12, and especially § 4.

[31] The third of these privileged spectator figures is Grace Wellborn, the intended wife of Cokes, who in the end will be won by Quarlous. She and the two wits as David Bevington comments "occupy the needed point of view of cultural sophistication in Jonsonian comedy; they take on the roles of commentators and clever undoers of human folly previously exercised by Volpone, Mosca and Peregrine in *Volpone*, Dauphine and his young friends in *Epicoene*, and Subtle, Face and Lovewit in *The Alchemist*". David Bevington, "The Major Comedies" in ed. Richard Harp and Stanley Stewart, *The Cambridge Companion to Ben Jonson*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp.84-85.

> [...]sono i veri spettatori dallo sguardo privilegiato, liberi di commentare l'azione sulla scena non solo in termini analettici, ma anche metateatrali, instaurando una cornice più ampia in cui, per esempio, è facile ridurre la scena dell'orazione contro il tabacco recitato da Overdo, a cui pure non hanno assistito, a una beffa teatrale compiuta ai danni dell'ingenuo Cokes[32].

The figure of Justice Overdo "the Justice of Peace, *meditant*" referred to in the Induction, is another parody within the play of the "director" figure. And it is with his attempt to re-direct the figure of Ezekiel Edgeworth, the "civil cutpurse, *searchant*", already described as such in the Induction, that a further series of enmeshing devices to unify the action are set in motion. Overdo sets himself up, with his soliloquy at the beginning of Act II, as antagonist of the fair, by presuming on his (marginal) power as occasional magistrate at the "courts of Pie-Powders", summary courts held at fairs and markets to administer justice among the itinerant dealers and their customers. During the course of the fair's opening (II. ii) Overdo lurks, disguised as a fool, near the booth of the female Falstaff, Ursla the pig-woman, which is one of the "central" spaces of the fair, by now peopled with the pedlars and vendors. Despite the typical paucity of stage directions the most blatant (and indeed significant) of these is that given in the middle of the play, when we and many of the fair-goers have already apparently "been" there, and it is that of the sign over Ursla's booth:

> LITTLEWIT *is gazing at the sign; which is the Pig's Head with a large writing under it.*

The Pig's Head is of course Beelzebub, Lord of the Flies, forerunner of the Lord of Misrule, which latter personage could perhaps also be defined as "Lord of the Marginal".

4. It is Nightingale, the ballad-singer who first introduces the name of Edgeworth (his companion in crime), immediately showing up Overdo's ineptitude, as he fails to pick up and understand the reference to a felon:

> NIGHTINGALE
> Alas, good Urs! Was Zekiel here this morning?
> URSLA
> Zekiel? What Zekiel?
> NIGHTINGALE
> Zekiel Edgeworth, the civil cutpurse – you know him well enough – he that talks bawdy to you still. I call him my secretary. (II.ii, 53-57)

When, later in the scene, Edgeworth makes his appearance, it is child's play for him and the other fair-folk to cozen Overdo into thinking he, a cutpurse, is simply a "civil young gentleman". Indeed Overdo immediately decides to redeem this forebear of Gay's Macheath:

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[32] Rocco Coronato, *cit*., p. 25.

OVERDO
What pity 'tis so civil a young man should haunt this debauched company! Here's the bane of the youth of our time apparent. A proper penman, I see't in his countenance; he has a good clerk's look with him, and I warrant him a quick hand.
MOONCALF
A very quick hand, sir.

Edgeworth, who was inspired by an actual pickpocket of Jonson's time[33], is seen as the cutting edge between the fair-goers and the fair-folk. For all his airs he belongs to the lower orders (or margins) of cutpursery: in *The Second Part* of *Coney Catching* [34] two grades of cutpurse are mentioned, the *nip* and the *foist*. Greene says:

> Although their subject is one which they work on, that is, a well-lined purse, yet their manner is different, for the nip useth his knife, and the foist his hand; the one cutting the purse, the other drawing the pocket [...] the foist holdeth himself of the highest degree, and therefore they term themselves gentleman-foists, and so much disdain to be called cutpurses that they will not carry even an eating-knife[35].

During the course of the play, however, Edgeworth's knife is put to good use, and also has its function in the underlying imagery for it "flays" the hapless Bartholomew Cokes of all his worldly goods – at the end of the play Cokes is only different from the Saint for whom he is named in that he is allowed to remain in his skin.

Speaking the language of both worlds, not to mention being the organizing force behind the fair-folk's criminal enterprises, Edgeworth may be seen to be the lynch pin which permits the carnivalesque overturning of these two worlds. When conversing with Overdo and his companions, Edgeworth manages, with his command of English and his elegant ways, to fashion himself as a civil young gentleman, more of a gentleman indeed than most of the other fair-goers. As MacIntyre points out:

> [...] only Quarlous and Winwife, who see him cut Cokes's second purse, have some title to the status Edgeworth has assumed; Quarlous, at least, has studied at both Oxford and at the Inns of Court, though he is now living as a gamester[36]

When talking to Ursla and her gang of pimps and prostitutes he shows himself to be the *éminence grise* behind the pig-woman's greasy throne, and is perfectly able to "talk bawdy":

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[33] See Jean MacIntyre, "The (Self)-Fashioning of Ezekiel Edgeworth in Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*" in *Early Modern Literary Studies* 4.3 (January, 1999), pp. 1-21.
[34] See Pugliatti on Greene p. 3.
[35] Robert Greene, *The Second Part of Coney-Catching* in *Coney Catchers and Bawdy Baskets*, ed. Gamini Sagado, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972, p. 211.
[36] *Ibidem.*

EDGEWORTH
(*This they whisper that* OVERDO *hears it not*)
All the purses and purchase I give you today by conveyance, bring here to Ursla's Presently. Here we will meet at night in her lodge, and share. Look you choose good places for your standing I' the Fair, when you sing, Nightingale [...] and i' your singing you must use your hawk's eye nimbly, and fly the purse to a mark still – where 'tis worn and o' which side – that you may gi' me the sign with your beak, or hang your head that way i' the tune [...] And shall we ha' smocks, Ursla and good whimsies, ha?

URSLA
Come, you are in your bawdy vein! The best the Fair will afford Zekiel, if bawd Whit keep his word.(II. iv, 34-52)

Edgeworth too takes over the function of "director" here, and Littlewit's threads of silk are woven into a tapestry as the spun threads are passed over and under one another while one more function or character is woven into the whole.

5. The text of *Bartholomew Fair* does not end with the script of its first performance. For its second performance, at court on 1st November, 1616, the Induction, written for the bear-pit, was no longer suitable. Neither indeed, could (even) Jonson treat an audience of courtiers as a theatre-full of idiots (though he did append a quotation to the beginning of the printed version of the play, underlining the opinion of audiences he had expounded in the Induction[37]). He therefore removed the Induction and substituted it with a Prologue and Epilogue addressing the King.

This ulterior frame is instrumental in showing what Jonson himself considered the fundamental aspects of *Bartholomew Fair*. For him, at least as far as James was concerned[38] it was to give a satirical view of

[...] the zealous noise
Of your land's Faction, scandalized at toys,
As babies, hobby-horses, puppet-plays,
And such like rage, wherof the petulant ways
Yourself have known, and have been vex'd with long.(PROLOGUE. 3-7)

that is the theatre-hating "Faction" of the Puritans. Perhaps, had Jonson known that only twenty-six years later the theatres would be closed by the Puritan régime he would have been less lenient with

[37] "*Si foret in terris, rideret Democritus:nam/Spectaret populum ludis attentius ipsis,/ Ut sibi praebentem, mimo spectacula plura,/ Scriptores autem narrare putaret assello/ Fabellam surdo*": Hibbard comments and translates: "Quoted from Horace, *Epistles*, II.i. 194-200, with lines 195-6 omitted, *nam* for *seu*, and *asello* misprinted as *assello*. 'If Democritus were still in the land of the living, he would laugh himself silly, for he would pay far more attention to the audience than to the play, since the audience offers the more interesting spectacle. But as for the authors of the plays – he would conclude that they were telling their tales to a dead donkey'". Hibbard ed., *cit*, p. 2.
[38] See Serpieri, p. 3 and note 8.

Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, and have put fewer frames around the "licence" (mentioned in the Epilogue) of the fair. But Jonson lived in happier times – as far as the theatre was concerned – than he knew and, turning to the shade of Philip Sidney, he (the Maker) wishes his "fairing" to represent to his sovereign simply "true delight".

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